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Tracing the Donatist presence in North Africa: An Archaeological Perspective¹

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Donatism has long been the subject of debates that focus primarily on the nature of the movement, its importance, its role (as representative of the ‘African Church’),² its relationship with the Catholic tradition, and its connection to the Patristic Authors. As often happens in studies on North Africa, the research has been driven by the large amount of rich textual evidence, with little attention paid to the material culture of Donatism and its archaeological traces. The cause for this lack of interest is justifiable as researching the presence of Donatism archaeologically has proved to be very difficult and rarely able to go beyond speculation. There are two distinct reasons to blame: on the one hand, the very nature of Donatism makes its buildings indistinguishable from Catholic ones; on the other hand, even if there was a distinction, the re-appropriation of these buildings by the Catholic Church has nearly eradicated any remaining evidence. In the past a few non-systematic attempts at interpreting the ‘archaeology of Donatism’ were made, with most finding conclusions difficult to draw.

This paper, therefore, aims to gather together for the first time the sparse, patchwork archaeological evidence that can be linked to the Donatist Movement, with the aim of answering the question, ‘Is there an archaeology of Donatism?’, as well as defining possible trends and directions for new research on the subject. It should be made clear at the outset that this operation will not be simple and the result is likely to be rather incoherent. It is, however, time to readdress this issue and to identify future areas of research. The task is made difficult not only by the scientific reasons indicated above, but also by the nature of the data, which come

¹ I would like to thank Ralf Bockmann, Jonathan Conant, Cam Grey, Richard Miles, Eric Rebillard, Bruno Pottier and John Whitehouse for the useful comments and bibliographical suggestions.

² See on this Frend 2004; more recently the same topic has been re-addressed by Pelltari 2009. The debate, more on the nature of the movement, has focused on defining the movement itself. Brent Shaw (1995) for instance highlights the fact that at some point the Donatist Church was the most important in North Africa and therefore would have been better defined as the African Church. The point in fact appears more complicated and it would be necessary to consider the movement from a geographical/provincial perspective. Overall the data from this paper seem to indicate a substantial predominance of the movement in some regions. This paper does not aim to enter into the debate on the definition of the movement: a full consideration of the study of the movement opposing the *Catholica* has been carried out exhaustively and comprehensively by Rossi (2013, 17-83). The word ‘Donatism’ will be here used for convenience.

generally from non-stratigraphic excavations or occasional finds during the colonial period between the end of the 19th c. and the beginning of the 20th c. Moreover, these earlier excavations often gleaned biased information, by attempting identifications without clear evidence to support the hypotheses. This attitude, combined with the lack of meticulous attention to excavation detail, makes the task of working with these findings particularly problematic. The largest part of the data refers to inscriptions, and in several cases attribution to Donatism can be only speculation. In a few instances, it appears these documents can be linked to specific churches. The aim, however, is not to collate and discuss the full catalogue of Donatist inscriptions, as this task has already been accomplished.³ The focus will therefore be on the churches, while a latter portion of the paper will consider some evidence that could be attributed to funerary practices. The reconsideration of the regional distribution of the Donatist bishops, based on the Acts of the Conference in Carthage in AD411, and the reconsideration of the distribution of the bishoprics in the landscape are also aspects addressed in this paper. The bishoprics have been located on a map that has been elaborated upon using Salama's map (in its new edition published by Desanges et al. 2010) and integrated with data from the *Barrington Atlas* (for the sites that were not present there - Figs. 1,2,3,4,5,6).

The identification of a few possible Donatist churches, located during excavations at the end of the 19thc. and the beginning of the 20th c., has been attempted by William Frend in his book on Donatism.⁴ It is therefore necessary to start from his work and then move into a consideration of other ideas.

Was Donatism a rural movement?

William Frend, on the basis of the data from the Council of Carthage in AD411,⁵ discussed the regional distribution of the Donatist movement. This is an aspect of the debate that needs to be fully reconsidered. Before doing so it is important to stress that the nature and organisation of the North African territories were so

³ Monceaux 1912 and more recently Duval Y. 1981 and 1982.

⁴ Frend 1952. A more recent work, not specifically focusing on archaeological evidence, but more the presence of martyr cult has been recently conducted by Matteo Dalvit (2013), in his PhD thesis at the University of Padova.

⁵ See on this also Lancel 1975, 155.

diverse that any research would require a detailed regional approach.⁶ Such an approach is still very difficult with the data currently available but an attempt will be made here. In the case of Donatism, this difficulty lies in the fact that data from the Council of Carthage in AD411 are problematic to fully understand. For instance, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish from rural and urban bishoprics based on the toponym.⁷ The highest distributions of Donatist bishoprics were in the native *Castella* in Numidia (such as *Castellum Tingitanum*); their presence was also unique in Tripolitania, and in the inland part of Byzacena and Mauretania Sitifiensis.⁸ There are two important points raised by Frend which need some reconsideration. The first one is that the Donatist presence is weak in large urban settlements;⁹ and the second is that the Donatists also controlled settlements near the frontier zone.¹⁰ The superiority of the Donatist bishops in rural contexts is not clearly apparent when considering the whole of North Africa. Putting aside the territory of Numidia, which represents a unique case, urban bishops across Proconsularis (highly urbanised) and Byzacena appear to have been distributed almost evenly, i.e. one Catholic Bishop corresponding to one Donatist bishop in each city. Therefore, both the presence and the relative power of each was probably somehow counterbalanced.¹¹ It is, however, difficult to say whether the urban nature of the bishoprics on both sides in these two regions is connected to the power of the churches or to the existing landscape organisation. Proconsularis, for instance, in the Mejerda Valley, was one of the most urbanised parts of the Roman Empire and contained only a small number of rural areas.¹²

⁶ This point also emerges very clearly in the work done by Leslie Dossey (2010) on the contrasts between different regional organisations.

⁷ See on this Lancel 1972, 139-140.

⁸ On this see also Lancel 1972, 132-134. For a general discussion on the number of bishops see also Shaw 2011, 807-11. For some discussion on the *castella* as bishoprics see Leone 2011-12.

⁹ Frend (1952, 52) points out that where Donatists were present, they chose to have a more moderate attitude.

¹⁰ Frend 1952, 51-52.

¹¹ The same point has already been made by Lancel 1972, 132-134, but it has never been given the attention that it should receive. Lancel pointed out that the idea that Donatism was primarily a rural movement came from the interpretation of Alypius, but he probably meant that there were more Donatist bishops in rural areas than Catholic ones (142-143) and not that the Donatists were primarily present in the countryside.

¹² For a more detailed consideration of the bishoprics in Proconsularis and how they changed through time see Leone 2011-12.

The role of the bishops and the nature of the religious conflict may have been quite different than in rural areas of Numidia, and left less apparent traces.¹³

Numidia is a unique case, as it is the place where the movement started and it is the place where Catholicism appears to have suffered the most. For instance, Council acts record a decrease in the number of Catholic bishops in Numidia in the years prior to the council in AD411. Numidia was also one of the North African regions with the strongest nomadic connotation and rural organisation, with a limited number of urban settlements.¹⁴ This intensive distribution across rural areas may reflect the fact that the Donatist clergy and bishops may have had an important role in supporting economic activities too, perhaps especially in Numidia. The majority of rural markets existed on large estates¹⁵ and those located on the borders between different regions were particularly important from the regional economic perspective.¹⁶ Donatist bishops were present on *fundi* and estates, itself a point of discussion at the start of the Council of Carthage in AD411 as it was pointed out that these leaders were not bishops of urban sieges and their power was inferior.¹⁷ It is perhaps not the case that the supposed evidence of Donatist presence in estates is recorded archaeologically in Numidia and Tripolitana, two provinces that had very similar organisations with few cities and large, strong, local and nomadic communities. At Henchir Gosset an olive press bearing the inscription *Bonis Bene* was found,¹⁸ and in Tripolitania a lintel was found at the entrance of a fortified farm with an inscription connected to the

¹³ Lancel 1972, 154 and 165-166. The Donatists from Numidia did participate in large numbers in the conference in 411 in order to make a point about the power of their province.

¹⁴ Lancel 1972, 162.

¹⁵ See for consideration on the location of the *nundinae*: Shaw 1981 and Fentress 2007. For some discussion on the connection between the Donatist cult (and in particular the Circumcelliones) see Rossi 2013, 310-312.

¹⁶ Estates under the control of the Donatist bishops were also on the borders, according to the Council in AD411. See Shaw 1981, 40.

¹⁷ For a discussion on this point see Frend 2002, 613. See also Leone 2011-12. The Catholic Church, from the 4th c. onward, was progressively acquiring lands and properties. The phenomenon of members of the clergy being directly involved in the management of lands occurred probably at lower levels (due to the more limited availability of lands) in Proconsularis. This is the case of the Bishop Crispinus mentioned by Augustine, who complained because the emperor leased his lands to a Donatist bishop (for further consideration and bibliography see Leone 2007, 100).

¹⁸ *CIL* VIII, 2046. See Frend 1952, 56. It is unclear whether the inscribed block was reused here, or was *in situ*. The site was characterised by a basilica and olive presses. See Duval 1973, 1142 and Duval 1993, 632.

Donatist cult.¹⁹ Moreover, texts attest to the presence of two bishops, one Catholic and one Donatist, within the same large estate, probably both being represented by a church, supporting two parallel communities and facilitating markets and exchanges.²⁰ This case is particularly indicative and it is perhaps necessary to consider to what extent people living on these estates, outside of the ancient authors who were involved directly in the religions, were aware of or fully understood the real differences between one church and another, or whether belonging to one religious community was dictated by personal convenience and habit or by the real understanding of religious differentiations.

The second point made by Frend regarding the presence of bishoprics also on the borders between different regions, makes necessary to point out that Donatist bishoprics were in fact everywhere, in urban and rural context, but (as shown in fig1) in particular they were all located along the major connecting routes. They were not particularly penetrating inland, but they were well distributed along the North African trade network.

Continuity of religious practices as an expression of local identity: the cult of Saturn

Since Donatism was not a principally rural phenomenon, it is necessary to reconsider Frend's suggestion that the wider distribution of Donatism in rural areas, where the majority of the population spoke Libyco-Punic, indicates that the movement developed as an expression of local ethnicity. One of his arguments was founded on the idea of the existence of a strong local identity, witnessed for instance by the connection between the cult of Saturn -- Baal Hammon in its Roman personification -- and Donatist religious practices of 'whitening altars'. Frend based his point on an inscription, found in Hadjeb-el-Aioun (Byzacena) that "indicates that the whitening of the cult objects forms the part of the ceremony".²¹ In his reconstruction the same practice was confirmed by other

¹⁹ See below and note 28. Data are currently too scant to say whether these inscriptions were found in their original locations or if they were reused and relocated at some point, making it difficult to discuss the evidence on the merits of its location.

²⁰ For instance the case of Melania. She had a possession near Thagaste, which had several artisans and two bishops: (*Vita Melaniae*, 21, 16) *dedit autem et possessionem multum prestantem redditum, quae possession maior etiam erat civitatis ipsius, habens balneum, artifices mulos, aurifices argentarios et aerarios: et duos eiscopos, unum nostra fidei et alium haereticorum*. See on Melania, Giardina 1988. On the economic role of the bishops see Leone 2006.

²¹ Frend 1952, 101. For the inscription see *CIL* VIII, 23156 and *BCH* 1906, p. ccxxv. *Pro Salute P(ublii?) et Passeni.... Liberatorum que [eorum Victo?]rin us [libertus? eojr(um)] dealbavit petra[s*

ancient sources.²² In particular, the text refers to '*dealbavit petra[s S]aturni*'. This was interpreted by Frend as proof that the practice of whitewashing altars (attested for the Donatist cult) was connected to or continued the cult of Saturn. It appears, however, that this practice was fairly common in the Roman period in connection with many cults, as for instance the cult of the *Liber Pater*.²³ Moreover, *albare/dealbare/opus albarium* is present also in contexts in which it did not have any religious meanings, but normally refer to stucco decoration or plastering for the refurbishment of buildings.²⁴ Similarly, the text from Hadjeb-el-Aioun mentioned by Frend most likely refers to the plastering of a monument or an altar dedicated to Saturn, and does not seem to identify the existence of a specific cult practice connected with the local cult of Saturn. Frend instead suggested that the inscription dedicated to Saturn refers to a typical custom characterising the cult of Baal-Hammon/Saturn and linked this to the *dealbatas aras aut mensas* mentioned by Optatus of Milevis [*Origines* iii, 4.6] when referring to Donatist graves. In this case, however, the reference is made to burials. In fact *Taurinus* suggests that *in loco Octausensis*, a place in Numidia not identified, people should have gone to the market where the *Circumcelliones* were usually found to find out how many people had been killed; according to the text, this was still possible to do by counting the *arae* and the stones that were *dealbatae*, or plastered. The text appears, therefore, to make reference to the number of graves that had been plastered on their external surfaces. The presence of plaster, however, may have been determined by the need for decorating and

S]aturni]. It is dated to the Imperial period. Frend (78 ff) identified the cult of Saturn as a typical local cult, whose characteristics and practices could not be easily linked to the Roman tradition. He suggests that the cult of Saturn seems to have almost completely disappeared by the Severan period (Frend 1952, 83).

²²Optat de Milève, *Traité contre le Donatiste*, t.II, texte critique, traduction, notes et index M. Labrousse, Paris 1996, iii, 4.6, 40-41. *In loco Octauensi occisi sunt plurimi et detruncati sunt multi quorum corpora usque in hodie per dealbatas aras aut mensas potuerunt numerari*. Leglay, 1966, 349 also mentions Aug., *De Civitate Dei*, vol. I libri I-X26, (CSEL XLVII), VII, 26, p. 207 where it is said:... *qui usque in hesternum diem madidis dapillis facies dealbata...*, although also in this case there is no reference to the presence of a specific cult. *dealbatas aras aut mensas* mentioned by Optatus of Milevis [*Origines* iii, 4.6].

²³See for instance the inscription from Henchir Biniana, dedicated to the *Liber Pater*, which refers to '*...et opera albari exornavit*' (CIL VIII, 11151), and mentions the action of *dealbare* in association with the dedication of statues. Near Capua an inscription dedicated to Jupiter indicates: *Hanc aram ne quis dealbe*, CIL X 3785 = CIL I² 688. The inscription is probably dated to the late Republican period. In a civic context, there is the inscription from the Capitolium of Brescia which makes reference to the '*Opus Albarius*'. See on this Zevi 2002, in particular 44-45.

²⁴In catacombs it is very common to find use of *Opus albarium* (characterised by plastered roof tiles, as described by Vitruvius) to create white surfaces which are then decorated and inscribed (see for instance Nuzzo 2000).

inscribing the funerary monument, as was very common in catacombs, or simply for hygienic reasons.²⁵ It is also possible that this simply meant that these tombs were whiter than others. Even in the attempt to support the idea that this was evidence of continued local pagan cult practice, the weakness of the data proving the existence of this religious ceremony in the cult of Saturn makes the hypothesis, at the moment, unsustainable.²⁶ The connection with the cult of Saturn and its practice is therefore best labelled as tentative.²⁷ In addition, the identification of Saturn with local traditions has also been recently challenged by Christophe Goddard, through the reconsideration of all the inscriptions collected by Marcel Leglay. It has been pointed out that the cult in Africa is in fact a good example of successful syncretism, rather than the result of a survival of a local religious tradition.²⁸ The point made by Frend²⁹ that the presence of Donatist Bishops in the countryside is related to the role that they acquired, replacing the priests of the cult of Saturn, was probably also not realistic.

Buildings and inscriptions: A difficult connection

Donatist churches have been primarily identified on the basis of the reading (by Monceaux 1912) of inscriptions and, in particular, on the attribution of a few expressions which have been singled out as distinctive to the Donatists. In many cases inscriptions are not easily linked directly to buildings; they can be attributed to old excavations, often found in different parts of religious structures. Monceaux makes a list of parts of buildings (mainly pilasters or lintels) bearing the inscription: '*Deo Laudes*', *Bonis bene*, *Mundus Munditia*.³⁰ It has not been possible in every case to connect these inscriptions to the original building, as it

²⁵This suggestion has also been made by Leglay for the cult of Saturn (Leglay 1966, 350 also suggests that the practice of *dealbare* was due to sacrifices involving blood, after which a substantial cleaning was required). On cult practices in the Christian world from the 4th c. to the 7th c. see De Santis 2008, 4531-4554.

²⁶Frend, in supporting his idea, refers to some excavations carried out in Numidia where there is evidence of relics found below the altar, covered by slabs that had been plastered. For some discussion of this evidence recorded in a few churches see Bérthier 1942, 194-195. In this case as well it is impossible to prove an existing ritual link, as these slabs too may have been plastered with the aim of being inscribed and decorated. See Frend 1997, in particular 603.

²⁷For a general discussion on this see Frend 1988 (101-102) and Brisson 1958.

²⁸For a detailed reconsideration of all the data and the inscriptions see Goddard 2010.

²⁹Frend 1952, 97-102.

³⁰Typical expressions that have been identified as pertaining to the Donatist church were: *Deo Laudes* (Monceaux 1912, 439-443), *Bonis bene* (Monceaux 1912, 456), *Mundus Munditia* (Monceaux 1912, 453-454). Monceaux himself, however, points out that some inscriptions are indistinguishable (1912, 438).

is not specified whether these findings were *in situ*, or reused somewhere in later structures. If they were clearly distinguishing a Donatist church, it is arguable that these inscriptions were removed from their original locations or hammered and chiselled when the Catholic Church repossessed these buildings. Almost all of the identified inscriptions are located in the same region, Numidia, with only two exceptions: in Sitifiensis and in Tripolitania. In Numidia they have been identified at: Henchir Gosset (southwest of Thebessa – on an olive press, as mentioned above); Aïn Mtirschn (region of Khenchela, or ancient Mascula); two pilasters at Khenchela probably from nearby settlements;³¹ Henschis Bou Said;³² Djemma Titaya (located between Aïn Beda and Khenchela);³³ Bir er Sed (southwest of Thebessa);³⁴ Medfou (between Aïn Beda and Constantine); Dalaa (between Mascula and Theveste);³⁵ and Henchir el Atrous (southeast of Thebessa, near Telljiden).³⁶ The inscription recorded in Tripolitania presents a variant, and reads *Deo Domino*.³⁷ The same form is from the inscription mentioned above, found on the lintel at the entrance of a farm excavated by Goodchild at Henschir Msuffin always in Tripolitania.³⁸ Monceaux suggested the presence of a Donatist baptistery at Sillègue (Novar) in Sitifiensis, based on the same formula in the inscription.³⁹ The geographical distribution of these epigraphic documents raises some questions: why are these inscriptions only recorded in Numidia, in one case in Sitifiensis and, with a variant, in Tripolitania? Have they been overlooked during excavations in other geographical areas or are they distinctive to specific regional communities? Did the Donatists only insert unique elements into their Numidian or Tripolitanian churches? Unfortunately, it is impossible to answer these questions with certainty, due to the nature of the data as demonstrated above. However it seems important to stress here the overlap between the

³¹ Monceaux 1912, 440. The two pilasters from Khenchela are decorated with roses, circles, fishes, and doves.

³² Monceaux 1912, 441: a Constantinian monogram, above *Deo Laudes*, and on the right and left sides a chrism flanked by BB = *B(onis) B(ene)*.

³³ Here the inscription *Deo Laudes* is preceded by '*In nomine [Ch]risti Filii [Dei]*', Monceaux 1912, 441.

³⁴ *Deo Laudes Dicamus* (Monceaux 1912, 441).

³⁵ *Deo Laudes Agamus*, (Monceaux 1912, 441).

³⁶ An inscription was found in the remains of a small building with pilasters. The inscription is mostly erased, but it is possible to read *Deo Laudes*. (Monceaux, 1912. 441).

³⁷ Vallis Rumia, *CIL* VIII, 10969: *[D]o[m]i[n]i [l]a[u]des ca[n]a[m]us?* (Monceaux 1912, 442).

³⁸ Frend 1952, 51, mentions that the site had been excavated recently and was unpublished: *Laudes Deo Domino*.

³⁹ *Deo Laudes super a No[varensibus]*, (Monceaux 1912, 442).

distribution of these inscriptions and the organisation of these provinces, characterised by strong local and nomadic communities, with a higher level of ruralisation. The simplest explanation seems to be that this practice was common primarily in these regions, although future research focusing specifically on this aspect will be necessary. It is also possible that the evidence is related to the fact that these, especially Numidia, were the regions where the superiority of Donatist bishops is recorded, where this church was more powerful, and where it is likely to have left the only surviving traces.

Donatism and the martyr cult: inscriptions and the re-appropriation of the Catholic Cult of Churches

The identification of Donatist churches has also been based on inscriptions found in churches that refer to Donatist martyrs. This interpretation however is biased by the re-appropriation of the churches by the Catholics, and therefore by the removal of the evidence of the Donatist cult. There are, however, a few cases in which one might see traces that some of the cults remained, for various reasons.

Three inscriptions have been identified that refer to three probable Donatist martyrs. The first was found in 1889, reused in the pavement of a mosque at Tichilla (Testour); it is thought to have come from a church at Tichilla or from Basilica I in Thignica (Touga). It mentions three young martyrs (*Santa Tres: Maxima et Donatilla et Secunda*) associated with Saint Stephen.⁴⁰ The inscription was on a limestone slab, similar to the slabs usually used to cover areas containing preserved relics, although in this case the text does not seem to refer specifically to the presence of relics. Maxima, Donatilla, and Secunda were martyrs from Thuburbo killed in AD304. Secunda is named alone, as *bona puella*. This refers to the tradition in which two girls (Maxima and Donatilla) were put to death, and the third one wanted to join them.⁴¹ It has been suggested recently by Matteo Dalvit that the martyr cult and *Passio* may have been acquired by the Donatist community as well, with a reinterpretation that *Secunda* committed suicide to reach martyrdom alongside her two friends. The inscription has been

⁴⁰ *CIL* VIII, 1392 (=14902), La Blanchère and Cagnat, 1889, 372-74, Duval 1981, 32.

⁴¹ Duval Y. 1981, 33-34 and Delehaye 1936, 296-300. It is important here to remember that the *Passio* was usually read during the Donatist liturgy, therefore these variations in the narration could have a strong impact on the people attending the church.

dated by Yvette Duval to the end of the 6th c. or the beginning of the 7th c.⁴² Dalvit suggests that the association with Stephen was a later addition, possibly connected to re-appropriation of the cult by the Catholic community. Stephen in fact was a proto-martyr hailing from Jerusalem, and his association therefore would link the cult tradition to the origin of the Catholic Church.⁴³ This reading of the evidence is interesting and offers a plausible interpretation, although it is difficult to prove.

One of the most famous Donatist martyrs is Marculus and, with him, the martyrs of Vegesela. In the area of Ksar el Kelb (near Tebessa), a Donatist church was found with an identifiable presence of this cult (Fig. 7).⁴⁴ Identification is based on the finding of a *memoria*, at the end of the southern part of the building, with the inscription: *Memoria Do/mni Marchuli*.⁴⁵ The *memoria* of Marculus was characterised by a hole, inside of which were found a few bones and pieces of glass, possibly the relics of Marculus himself.⁴⁶ Other inscriptions were found inside the church which preserve typical Donatist phraseology.⁴⁷ The basilica shows an irregular plan with a *mensa* isolated in a room near the grave; this may have been used for *refrigeria* on the grave of Marculus.⁴⁸ Because of the irregularity of the church and the location of the *memoria* Cayrel suggested that it was a later addition, without indicating any chronology.⁴⁹ It has been more recently proposed that this addition belongs to a phase when the church was regained by the Catholic community. In this reconstruction, the cult of Marculus, at one time very strong, could not be removed. On the other hand the *mensa*, used for *refrigeria*, and the practice associated to it was not well accepted by the Catholic Church, which tried to discourage the practice by hiding it. This has also

⁴² See note above.

⁴³ For some detailed consideration on the value and importance of Saint Stephen see Rossi 2013, 324-30. His relics were introduced to Africa in 416. The same point is also considered in Dalvit 2013, 22.

⁴⁴ Duval Y. 1981, 158-9. The stone is now lost. The church was located at around 100m north of a Byzantine fort.

⁴⁵ The excavation is published in Cayrel 1934, 114-142. For the inscription see p. 134. A second phase of the excavation was carried out in the following year; see Courcelle 1936, 174.

⁴⁶ For a description of the finds see Michel 2005, 95-104.

⁴⁷ For instance: *Deo Laudes h(ic) omne dicamus*; see Cayrel 1934, 130-134.

⁴⁸ *Refrigeria* were originally Pagan practices which extended to the early Christian community. In North Africa in particular became a common practice between the 3rd and the 4th c. in connection with the martyr cult (see Rubio Navarro 2008). For a discussion on the changing nature of the use of *refrigeria*, also through archaeological evidence see MacMullen 2009, 58-67.

⁴⁹ Cayrel 1934, 130.

led to the suggestion that the Donatists continued to practice *refrigeria*, in contrast with the Catholics,⁵⁰ although, it has to be stressed that, if this was the case, the *mensa* could have been removed easily without requesting the building of a hiding wall. Without being able to look at the structure and the stratigraphic relationship between different walls,⁵¹ it is difficult to make any further comment on this interpretation. The wall may also have been a much later addition. A new interpretation regarding the cult and the presence of the relics of Marculus has been recently put forward. It suggests that the addition of the *memoria* took place only shortly after the construction of the church and may have been related to the burials already present there.⁵² The church in fact contains nine graves; all in sarcophagi, eight graves were in the apse, while another one was located under the altar. In the reconstruction proposed by Dalvit, the nine graves may belong to the nine friends of Marculus mentioned by the *Passio* that were killed in Vegesela.⁵³ The lack of stratigraphic evidence and the limited detail in the published plan unfortunately do not allow us to confirm this hypothesis. However it seems important to stress that one of the burials was privileged, being located under the altar. There appears to have been a hierarchy among these graves that were distributed inside the church, while the narration of the martyrdom does not seem to make a clear differentiation among the companions from Vegesela.

A second possible *memoria* was identified in Timgad in a chapel located to the north of the Trajanic arch. The inscription is on a reused triangular limestone slab, possibly the foot of an altar.⁵⁴ The plan of the building in which it was found has not been published, and the letters of the inscription are very irregular. The inscription bears the following text⁵⁵:

⁵⁰ Dalvit 2013, 70 ff.

⁵¹ The partition wall appears a lot thinner than the others and the excavators indicate the wall is 'très mince'.

⁵² Dalvit 2013, 70.

⁵³ The idea of the possible identification of the nine graves with the nine friends mentioned in the *Passio* is mentioned by Courcell (1936, 182). Some doubts are advanced by Noël Duval (1989), who points out the uncertainty of the identification of the Ksar el Keb with Vegesela. The different locations of burials in the church may suggest that one of them was privileged, but the excavator indicates that the location of the graves inside the church was probably determined by the presence of hard rock that forced the builder to change the original plan and locate the graves in the apse (Courcell 1936, 172).

⁵⁴ Monceaux 1920, 75, although it seems an odd position for an inscription.

⁵⁵ The inscription was partially published by Monceaux 1920, 76, then completed in Monceaux 1924, 78-81. It has been fully published by Frend, 1940.

*B(onis B(ene) et Gaudet Pe/trus et Laza/rus rogo/te domine/ su(b) veni/ criste tu/
solus me/dicus sa/nctis et/ penitent/ibus (a)ma/re manib/[us] et pedibus De(i)*

The incipit of the text leaves little doubt that the inscription refers to the Donatist cult. The peculiarity of the text is in the phrase *Christus Medicus*, which Monceaux⁵⁶ explains with the idea of Christ as a curator of souls.⁵⁷

In the Basilica of Uppenna (modern Henchir Chigarnia) there is an uncertain identification of a *memoria* of Saturninus. Two inscribed mosaics were found, the first one simple and characterised by the only partially-preserved inscription in a frame⁵⁸:

*[Haec sunt/ nomina martirum? S]atur/[ninus, Bindemius, Sa]turnin/[nus, Donatus,
Saturninus] Gududa/, [Paula, Clara, Lucilla, Fo]rtum, Iader,/ [Caecilius, Emilius,
Passi di]e III non(as) aug/[ustas, depositi VI id(uum) nov]embrium.*

A later mosaic (with the addition of the Saints Peter and Paul), located on the central nave of the church, bears a cross at the beginning and two lambs on either side of the inscription⁵⁹:

*Hec sunt nomina martirum Petrus/ Paulus Saturninus Presbiter./ Idem Saturninus
Bindemius, Saturnin/us Donatus, Saturninus, Gududa,/ Paula, Clara, Lucilla,
Fortun. (?),/Iader, Caecilius, Emilius. Passi die/ nonas Agustas depositi VI idu/s
nobembres Gloria in esce/lsis deo et intera pacs ominibus.*

The Donatist identification of the church has been subject to discussion for quite some time and the issue is yet to be resolved. Yvette Duval points out that the inscription does not refer to the presence of relics;⁶⁰ she also refutes a direct link with the Donatist martyr by pointing out that there are no elements which exclude the identification of Saturninus Presbyter with a local priest. Dominique

⁵⁶ Monceaux 1920, 77-78.

⁵⁷ The recent work by Matteo Dalvit (2013, 53-54) goes a little further in the interpretation. Building on the hypothesis already made by Monceaux that the inscription makes specific reference to an African text, possibly a *Passio*, Dalvit suggests a connection with the Donatist martyr Devotus, with some references. In his *Passio* (PaDs 10) in fact it is possible to find correspondence with the idea of *Christus Medicus*.

⁵⁸ Duval 1981, 62. A second inscription was on the step:/.../tatis suae beatissimis marturibus (Duval Y., 1981, 63). Raynal (2005b, 714-716) points out the relationship between the two mosaics, suggesting that the partially preserved one was then later replaced by the new, more decorated and more complex mosaic, with the addition of the Apostles Peter and Paul.

⁵⁹ Duval 1981, 64.

⁶⁰ Duval Y. 1986, 684-691 and Duval Y. 1981, 66-67.

Raynal returns to the identification of Saturninus twice⁶¹ and reaffirms his original idea that the mosaic in fact refers precisely to the presbyter mentioned in the Donatist *Passio*, the martyr of Abitina. If this is true, it is likely that the second inscription, which also bears Peter and Paul, was displayed after the re-appropriation of the church by the Catholic community.⁶² As in the case of Marculus, the cult of Saturninus would have been left in place, due to the fame of the tradition, probably very strong in the region.⁶³

Remaining in the cult of the martyrs of Abitina, Dominique Raynal also refers to two other inscriptions (*memoriae*) which probably mention the Donatist martyr Emeritus⁶⁴ as one of the principal confessors. The inscriptions were uncovered in Henchir Taghfaght (5km west of Kenchela) and in Ain Ghorab. Interestingly, both inscriptions refer to the Apostles, Peter and Paul.⁶⁵

At Ain Ghorab, the stone bearing the inscription was found in the remains of a square building, standing 20m on each side (there was probably a church here destroyed for the building of a fort). It was originally interpreted as a *memoria*,⁶⁶ but it has later been suggested that the stone was found reused in a Byzantine fort.⁶⁷ The palaeography of the text suggests a chronology of the second half of the 5th c.⁶⁸ It is likely the large slab was the lintel at the entrance dedicated to the martyr Emeritus, one of the martyrs of Abitina killed at Carthage in AD304. He is also mentioned in another inscription at Kenchela. Louis Leschi proposed that the inscriptions probably came from a *memoria* that he identified in the basilica, found at around 100m south of the fort.⁶⁹

⁶¹ Raynal 1973, 33-72. The same issue has been considered more recently in Raynal 2005b. See also Farges 1883, 19-34, in particular 31-34.

⁶² Raynal 2005b, 759-760. He points out that if it was a local presbyter, it would not have been necessary to specify his title. The fact that the Presbyter is specified seems to indicate that this was the famous one. See also Monceaux 1912, 467-468.

⁶³ For some consideration on this point see Rossi 2013 and Dalvit 2013, 40-1.

⁶⁴ For a discussion on this group of martyrs see Duval Y. 1986, 682-691.

⁶⁵ Raynal 2005b, 760-1.

⁶⁶ Masqueray 1878, 466-7 and De Rossi 1878-79.

⁶⁷ Leschi 1957, 309-10. For a synthesis see Duval Y. 1981, 151-2.

⁶⁸ Duval Y. 1981, 152: (cross) *H(i)c domus D(e)i no[stri Christi, h]ic avitatio Sp(iritu)s S(an)c(t)i P[aracleti?]/* (cross) *H(i)c memoria beati martiris Dei consui [E]mer[iti]./(cross) H(i)c exaudietur omnis q(u)i invocat nomen D(omi)ni omnipot[entis]. Cum homo miraris? D(e)o iubante meliora videvis. A.....XL (or I)*

⁶⁹ Leschi 1957, 153.

The other document that refers to the same Donatist martyr has been identified at Henchir Taghfaght.⁷⁰ The building has not been described in detail but is generally referred to as a Christian sanctuary at the entrance of Mascula. In this case the dedication also refers to the cult of the Apostles Peter and Paul. The association with the Apostles has been interpreted as a later addition, probably added during the re-appropriation of the church by the Catholic community. This process involved association of Donatist martyrs with strong Catholic figures.

Another complex that may be connected to the Donatist church, and over which a long debate has been carried out, is the baptismal found at Kelibia. The problem lies in the mosaic inscription on the baptistery, which refers to: *S(a)n(ct)o beatissimo Cypriano episcopo antiste cum s(a)n(ct)o Adelfio presbitero huiusce unitatis Aquinius et Iuliana eius cum Villa et Deogratias prolibus tesellu(m) aequori perenni possuerunt.*

The identification of Cyprian has long been debated. Yvette Duval proposes that the inscription refers to a homonym of the 3rd-century bishop of Carthage.⁷¹ Similarly Courtois contested the identification with the famous bishop of Carthage on the basis that the inscription seems to refer to a local priest and bishop.⁷² In support of an identification with the 3rd-century bishop are Noël Duval⁷³ and, more recently, Dominique Raynal (who extends the analysis of the Basilica of Uppenna to the Baptistery of Kelibia). Raynal highlights in particular the presence and co-existence of the bishop Cyprian and the words *Pax*, *Fides*, and *Caritas*. In connection with the baptismal font and the elements mentioned above, there is the idea of unity, here essentially referring to an attempt at stressing the relationship between the two communities. Cyprian is seen as above the Catholic and Donatist dispute and can be related to both sides.⁷⁴ The idea of peace, faith, and charity, all appearing on the edge of the baptistery, refer to the response by Augustine to the Catholic hierarchy. The Donatists recall the figure of Cyprian because of their link to the baptism and the unity of their church. *Pax* *Fides* and *Caritas* are instead elements that characterise the Catholic Church

⁷⁰ Farges 1883, 19-34: *Hic e[st dom]/us [Dei, hic] memo[ria] apostol[or. et] beati Emeri/ti gloriosi/consulti.* See also Duval Y. 1981, 164.

⁷¹ Duval Y. 1981, 57.

⁷² Courtois 1955.

⁷³ He considers the issue on several occasions; see as the last in Duval, N. 1981, 186-187.

⁷⁴ Raynal 2005b, 778.

itself.⁷⁵ Overall, it is arguable that in this (Byzantine?) process of reconstruction there also occurred a process of re-appropriation of a Donatist building by the Catholic Church.⁷⁶

Donatist churches and their debatable identification

In a few cases inscriptions have been found inside buildings, allowing for attempts at identification with the Donatist cult. One such case is a building excavated by Bérthier between 1930 and 1932. The church at Fom el Amba⁷⁷ (Wadi Rhezel) was located around 1 km from a group of five churches. The building was a rectangle, organised to include three naves. At the end of the building were three steps leading to a large apse. A door leading to two large rooms (2.10mx5.70m) opened into the apse. The plan of the complex (only described) does not find any comparison in the region. Near the apse, in the internal part of the church, a grave containing one body was excavated, and towards the centre of the church another cavity was excavated that contained parts of two bodies. Another burial in a sarcophagus was also found in the internal part of the building. Among the architectural fragments of the structure was found the inscription *Deo Laudes*.⁷⁸

A second church that has been considered as dedicated to the Donatist cult for a period of its history. This church is located in the periphery of Thamugadi (Timgad). Here the original excavation unearthed a large complex, identified as the Monastère de l'Ouest.⁷⁹ It was characterised by one large and one smaller church, a small chapel, and a few structures identified as part of a residential area.⁸⁰ Among the ruins of the church was found an inscription referring to the Donatist Bishop of Thamugadi: *Optatus: Haec jubente sacerdote dei Optato perfeci*.⁸¹ The document is not a *memoria* and does not refer to the presence of a martyr cult, but instead to the building of the church by Optatus. It has been

⁷⁵ Raynal 2005b, 781-82.

⁷⁶ Raynal 2005b, 785.

⁷⁷Bérthier 1942, 76 and 207. Other speculations are also made on inscriptions on other churches in the same settlement, making reference to the *Domus Dei*, that Bérthier suggests may indicate a Donatist presence (207).

⁷⁸Bérthier 1942, 76-77.

⁷⁹ Ballu 1921. Here the complex has been identified as the Monastère de Ouest. Germain 1969, 122: the inscription was found in the vestibule of the house. The baptistery of the complex is dated between the end of the 4th c. and the beginning of the 5th c. The inscription is in a mosaic.

⁸⁰ Albertini 1939, 100-103.

⁸¹ Marrou 1962-65, 235-238.

suggested that the reason for this continuing presence and the continuity of display of the inscription, even after the re-appropriation of the building by the Catholic Church, must be seen in connection with the importance and fame of the Bishop seat.⁸² This would have resulted in the same phenomenon that occurred in the case of Marculus and possibly Saturninus mentioned above. Due to his fame, his dedication was left in place but associated with other powerful Catholic figures, in order to reinforce the presence of the Catholic Church.⁸³ However it has to be considered that the inscription was found in the vestibule of the house annexed to the church, so it is possible that the reason the inscription was left in place was not related at all to the change in functionality of the church, as it was not visible to the people attending the cult. It may have been left in place for convenience

The funerary rites and funerary evidence: another difficult case

Other evidence has been recorded during excavation of the same complex in Thamugadi. An object similar to a tea strainer, probably a *colum*, was found inserted in the sarcophagus in the basilica of the same complex. The sarcophagus was in the chapel annexed to one of the two churches, in the ground with only the lid emerging from floor level. The *colum* was inserted in the lid, over a hole.⁸⁴ The evidence is linked directly to the practice of *refrigeria*. If this could be connected to the Donatist cult (as suggested by the founders), this would confirm the hypothesis already advanced for the cult of Marculus, that in the Donatist church the *refrigeria* continued to maintain importance and did not follow the same path as the Catholic Church, which was progressively banning the practice.

Some funerary evidence has been identified, although its connection to church building and the Donatist presence has long been debated. This is the case for 65 rudimental inscriptions found at Djebel Nif-en-Nser (modern Ain 'Mlia). All of these were simply incised stones, but due to their location at the slope of a cliff it has been suggested that they may belong to the martyr cult of the *Circumcelliones*, who, seeking martyrdom, committed suicide. Identification lies in the interpretation of the letter 'R', as a reference to the term '*reditio*' by some

⁸² Albertini 1939, 103.

⁸³ For some discussion on this aspect see recently Dalvit 2013, 123.

⁸⁴ The object is now preserved at the Museum of Timgad. Marrou 1949.

scholars. Those supporting the idea of a martyr cult also call attention to the nature of the landscape, located at the bottom of a steep cliff.⁸⁵ Yvette Duval has instead expressed a strong opinion against the meaning of '*reditio*', and she does not believe it is possible to support this traditional interpretation.⁸⁶ The lack of specific references does not allow us to reach definitive conclusions; it would be very helpful to finally have some archaeological evidence connected to the presence of the *Circumcelliones*.⁸⁷ The nature of this community, characterised primarily by wandering monks, makes it impossible to single out archaeological remains with any certainty.

Conclusions

A new approach to Donatism: the need for regional studies

The first point to be stressed is that it is archaeologically impossible to link the Donatist cult to any pre-existing local cult or a concept of local ethnicity. It has to be pointed out, however (and perhaps future research will follow this direction), that the few pieces of archaeological data appear to be concentrated in very specific geographical areas. Whether this evidence results from the fact that in these regions there was a higher concentration of Donatist buildings and therefore they have survived longer, or it is biased by the way in which archaeological evidence has been collated, it is difficult to say; although, at the moment, the first hypothesis seems to be more realistic. It is important to consider the higher concentration in Numidia, and the other evidence being in Sitifiensis and in Tripolitania. These provinces had a very similar territorial organisation, with few urban centres, where local tradition had remained very strong, even during the Roman period. These were also regions where the presence of local nomadic and stable independent ethnic groups were very strong and where the presence of Catholicism probably struggled to find its way in an already well organised landscape. Even the Romans failed to change this existing landscape in its essential form. Another point that is important to make is that

⁸⁵ Logeart 1940, Leschi 1940, and Bérthier 1942, 215-8. This idea has been recently reconsidered by Dalvit 2013.

⁸⁶ Duval 1981, 489.

⁸⁷ An attempt at identifying remains attributable to the presence of the *Circumcelliones* has been made by William Frend (1952) in which the *cellae* (where the *Circumcelliones* lived, according to the ancient sources) were shrines connected to the martyr cults with granaries where the *Circumcelliones* were fed.

we must challenge the idea that Donatism was strong in rural areas. It was equally present in urban areas, but in these contexts it was probably more counterbalanced by the Catholic presence, which was well established there. The majority of textual evidence that refers to the religious conflicts are of Numidian origin, and the image emerging from the analysis of these documents may not be appropriate for all regions of North Africa; this is the direction that future research needs to move in. Unfortunately Numidia is understood primarily through texts, while other parts of North Africa, as for instance Proconsularis and Byzacena, are understood primarily from an archaeological point of view. The continuous attempt of elaborating models from Numidian texts and applying them to other North African regions for which we have more archaeological data has to be challenged. Traditional studies have already highlighted an important point: Numidia, the place where the Donatism movement was born, is the region where it is appropriate to call the movement 'the African church'. This is less the case in other regions of North Africa, where the balance between the two churches was almost even. This is reflected also in the progressive reduction of Catholic bishops recorded before the council in AD411 in Numidia. Clearly, the Catholics were struggling to maintain power.

Is there an archaeology of Donatism?

In terms of the architectural layout, the few examples of recorded data make it particularly difficult to attempt any categorisation. Apart from the quality of the excavations or lack thereof (already mentioned at the outset), none of the churches remained in its original Donatist form as each was repossessed by the Catholic Church. Additionally, many of them underwent a phase of reconstruction in the Byzantine period, and little is left of the original layouts.

A few pieces of evidence seem to indicate that the Donatists practised or continued to practise the *refrigeria* and this contrasted with the attitude of the Catholic Church, which actively tried to stop such activity.⁸⁸

In a few cases inscriptions within churches allow us to suggest the presence of a process of re-appropriation by the Catholic Church. This process appears to have

⁸⁸ It is for instance attested by the episode of Augustine's mother wanting to celebrate a banquet in Milan, but the practice was forbidden by Ambrose (for more discussion on this aspect see Saxer 1980, 134-5).

been carried out primarily through the manipulation of the cult of the martyrs. Donatists acquired martyrs that were Catholic by modifying their scriptural tradition. The Catholic Church engaged in the same practice. Particularly strong cults, like that of Marculus, could not simply be removed but had to be left in place. The same can be said of the presbyter Saturninus, whose Catholicisation occurs through an association with the Apostles, providing a strong and very Catholic link. The same principle is reflected in the cult of Stephen, connected to Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda. The acquisition by the Catholic Church of the Donatist martyrs is certainly a reflection of the process of unification that started after the council in AD411. This process, in absence of specific inscriptions witnessing it, makes the attempt at looking at archaeological evidence extremely difficult⁸⁹.

Apart from the presence of inscriptions that allow us to reconstruct the presence of the martyr cult, when only the structure of the church is preserved, it is impossible to clearly recognise a Donatist church. However this is probably a more widely recognised problem: the difficulty inherent to creating an archaeology of buildings that are themselves the result of religious controversies.

Illustrations

Fig 1. General map of North Africa with the location of Donatist Bishops (elaborated from the Salama's map)

Fig. 2. Map of the North-East Africa (detail) with the Donatist Bishoprics (elaborated from the Salama's map)

Fig. 3. Map of with detail of the Mejerda Valley (elaborated from the Salama's map)

Fig. 4. Map of the South East part of North Africa (detail) (elaborated from the Salama's map)

⁸⁹ If we take for instance the case of Thélepte, which in 411 had one Catholic and one Donatist bishop, we record the presence of seven churches and several chapels (Gsell 1933). The lack on recent work in the city and probably the lack of specific 'Donatist' inscriptions make impossible to make any speculation on the presence and location of the two religious community within the city.

Fig. 5. Map of Central North Africa (detail) (elaborated from the Salama's map)

Fig. 6. Map with North west Africa (detail) (elaborated from the Salama's map)

Fig. 7. Map of the so called Basilica of Marculus (from Cayrel 1934)

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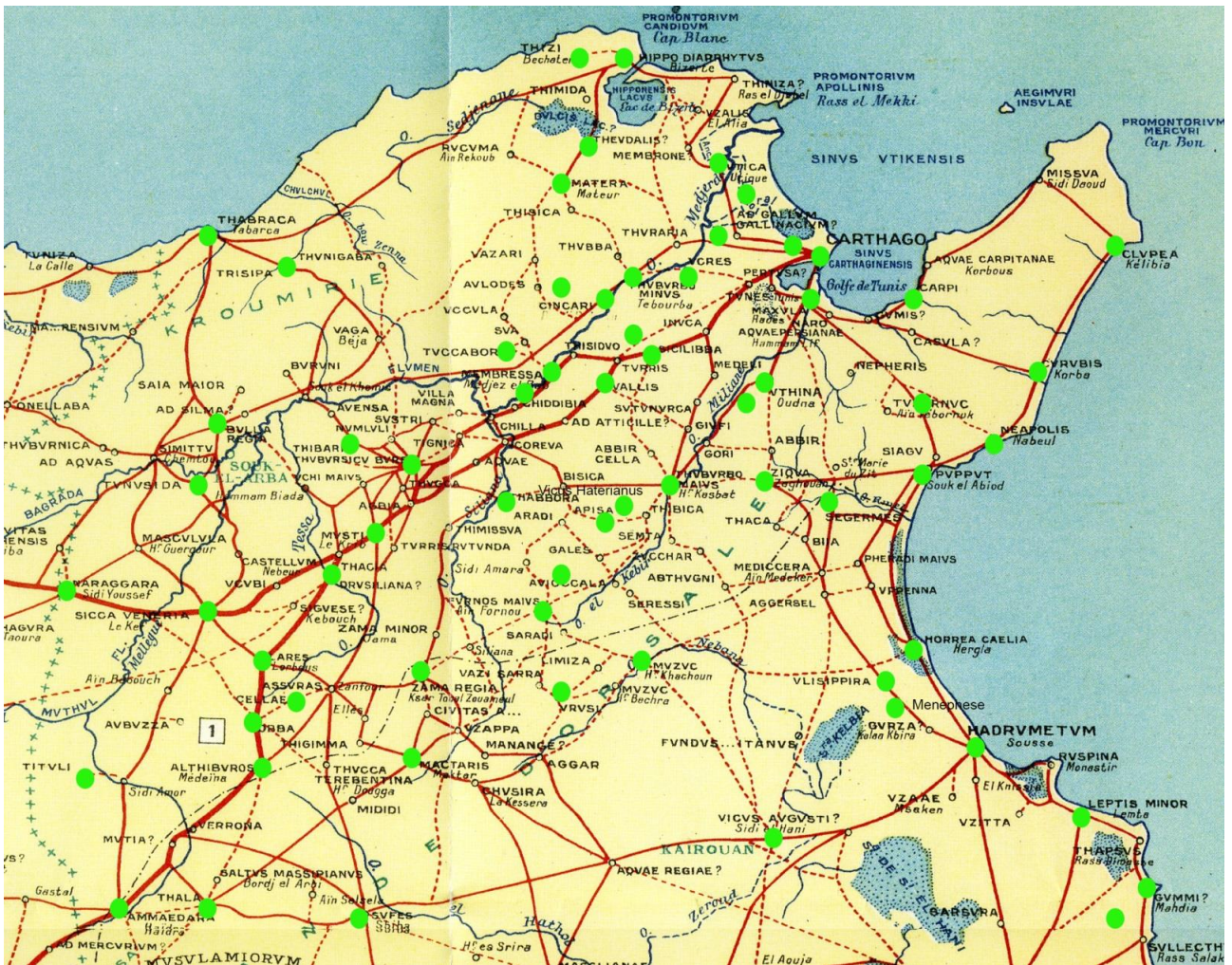


Fig.3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6